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AUTHOR Brogan, Bernard B.; Brogan, Walter A.
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ABSTRACT

This paper first proposes a definition for outcome-based education (OBE) and then identifies questions that challenge the assumptions of OBE. In so doing, it sets the agenda for an honest debate on issues of policy, process, and assessment. OBE calls for a shift from an emphasis on inputs to an emphasis on performance standards for all students. The approach is based on the belief that the success of schools should be measured by what students know, rather than on what they are supposed to know. Key elements of a comprehensive outcome-based model include the following: (1) a concept of education as a process; (2) continuous and benchmark assessment; (3) early student readiness; (4) an engaging learning environment; (5) family involvement; (6) development of a community partnership; (7) qualified teachers; (8) state-of-the art facilities; and (9) shared governance. In conclusion, the concerns surrounding the assumptions including the political aspect of OBE need to be addressed and provide a basis for serious debate. The full potential of OBE will be achieved only if the emphasis is on the learning process and not the outcome. Contains 11 references. (LMI)

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Defining and Debating the Issues: Is Outcome-based Education the Answer?

Bernard R, Brogan,
Widener University

Walter A. Brogan,
Villanova University

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Introduction

Outcome-based education is consider by a growing number of educational theorists and policy makers as the answer to the complex question of how American schools can prepare students for the challenges they will face upon graduation (Finn, 1992; Spady, 1988; Glasser, 1991). .Critics of this movement question the basic assumptions the OBE approach, the legitimacy of requiring some of the outcomes, and the validity and reliability of assessing the demonstrations of learning (Simonds, 1993; McQuaide & Pliska; Fowler-Finn, 1993; Shanker, 1993;). The purpose of this paper is to first proposed a definition for outcome-based education and next identify those questions that genuinely challenge the assumptions of outcome-based education and in so doing set the agenda for an honest debate on issues of policy, process and assessment. Based on these questions, the authors summarize with a number of conclusions about outcome-based education.

As any would-be teenage driver would attest, the concept of requiring individuals to demonstrate mastery is widespread and represents an idea that dates back to the middle ages when the guild required a "masterpiece" for admission. The concept of performance-based learning dates back in the history of education and the principles of outcome-based education surfaced in 1949 in Ralph Tyler's influential book, The Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction. (1949). In his book, Tyler suggests four questions that must be addressed in writing curriculum: (1) What educational purposes should the school seek to attain? (2) What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes? (3) How can these educational experiences be effectively organized? (4.)How can we determine whether these purposes are being attempted? School districts that are attempting the transition to an outcome-based system recognize the difficult challenge these questions present. Not only is there a general resistance to change (Margolis, 1991), there is lack of agreement on what young people need to know and be able to do as a result of their education, and little consensus on the best strategies to help students achieve these outcomes.

Outcome-based Education Defined

A true story that happened recently at a local school district illustrates one of the major problems in the

outcome-based education discussion. The school district was in its second year of planning for the transition to outcome-based education and members of planning committee met with the school board to report progress. In the middle of the report one of the more honest school board members inquired, "What exactly do you mean by outcome-based education?"

Outcome-based education is fundamental different from traditional education and requires the full support of all members of the school community, yet many stakeholders - including educators- do not share a common understanding of its meaning. For this reason, we have chosen as a major assignment in this paper to define outcome-based education as we understand it. Although there may be disagreement over the view we provide, it is hoped that defining the assumptions of this view will provide the basis for subsequent debate.

Outcome-based education calls for a shifting from the traditional approach where the emphasis is on inputs (e.g. number of days in school) to an outcome-based system where the emphasis is on performance standards for all students. Central to this shift is a change in expectations for student learning, in the practice of teaching, and in the organization and management of public schools with an emphasis on (1) establishing what it is we want students to know and be able to do, (2) designing appropriate assessments

to measure how well students are achieving these outcomes, and (3) holding students, teachers and administrators accountable for reaching these goals and expectations (Elmore, 1987). Burns and Squires (1987) emphasized the importance of defining clear outcomes when they asserted that "...defining useable learning outcomes is the critical first activity. Once learning outcomes are outlined and organized, the next activity is to adopt or develop appropriate curriculum materials for those outcomes" (p. 2).

The assumptions of outcome-based education are compelling: all students can learn, whether students learn is more important than when they learn it, success breeds success, demonstrations of learning should be required for graduation (Spady, 1988). Spady describes four aspects of outcome-based education that are useful in defining the concept. First, outcomes are demonstrations of learning, not the names of subject areas, content, concepts, programs or themes. These demonstrations can take many shapes but they require that what ever learning took place should come to light in some form of observable behavior. This can be anything from filling out a test sheet to a complex demonstration such as reenacting the civil war or organizing a recycling effort. The important point here is that if we establish meaningful goals for education and we want students to demonstrate that they have accomplished them, we will have

to go well beyond the multiple choice test and the traditional approach to teaching and learning..

The second aspect of outcome-based education is that learning occurs in settings, and settings add their own conditions and challenges for demonstration. Almost all school outcomes assume that the classroom setting will suffice as a significant demonstration context. Spady argued that if we want the lessons of school to translate as lessons in life we need to make the students' community their classroom. This assumption challenges the "bell-cell" organization currently in place in many high schools.

Spady's third point is that outcomes are culminating demonstrations of significant bodies of learning. Culmination here means "at the end" when all of the previous learning can be synthesized and applied in a final demonstration. This final demonstration can only be achieved if the student has been prepared early on for the challenge it represents.

Finally, Spady asserted that outcomes pertain to a whole lot more than cognitive learning. The outcomes of education need to relate to the student as a whole human being, and in some way represent the total learning experience of the student. This means that when a student leaves the classroom and ultimately school itself the student's orientation toward life and success should be influenced by what he or she

learned. The assumption here is that the purpose of education reaches beyond the acquisition of a body of knowledge.

These assumptions, however, are premised on an entirely different organizational framework than currently exists in public education. In addition, these assumptions presume that stakeholders are generally dissatisfied with the current system when in fact many parents and teachers are satisfied and resistant to any major change (Margolis, 1991). The assumptions of outcome-based education also suggest that community consensus on graduation outcomes will prevail. As compelling as outcome-based education may be, the history of school reform provides a telling story of well-intentioned restructuring initiatives that failed because of politics or lack of politics. Furthermore, we argue, that implementation of outcome-based education will only succeed if carried out through a process of stakeholder involvement. This means that educational administrators and policy makers must listen to and address those questions that are being voiced by the various stakeholders. We believe, however, that one of the most promising aspects of outcome-based educations is that it challenges school communities to establish clear and specific educational goals and reconsider their academic mission. These educational goals should define what all high school graduates are expected to know and be able to do as a result of their schooling. What does it mean to be an educated

person? As local communities consider statewide educational goals and engage in the task of defining educational outcomes for their students, the need for fundamental rethinking of the tradition approach to curriculum and instruction is noticed.

Outcome-based education, as we understand it, emphasizes that the success of schools should be measured not on *what students are supposed to know*, but rather on *what students do know*. Our definition of outcome-based education, however, goes well beyond the call for a shift to an outcome-oriented, performance-based educational model. Indeed, we argue that an over-emphasis on the "outcome" will result in a de-emphasis on the "process of learning,"which is what really deserves our attention (Brogan & Brogan, 1993).

Key Elements of a Comprehensive Outcome-Based Model

Because we define outcome-based education in terms of systemic restructuring, we distinguish the following as key elements of a comprehensive outcome-based educational model.

1. Education as a Journey, Not A Destination

Outcome-based education is primarily a process, not a product. Although it is critically important that there be common agreement on the destination (What does it mean to be an educated person?), the emphasis must be placed on continuous engagement in the learning process. If this is done effectively, the result will be an accomplished graduate

ready and eager to continue his or her lifelong journey of learning.

2. Continuous and Benchmark Assessment

Student performance should be evaluate for continuous improvement and educational outcomes should be assessed at regular intervals throughout the student's elementary and secondary schooling. These assessments should assist schools and parents in planning developmentally appropriate educational programs throughout the student's school years.

3. Students Ready for School - Schools Ready for Students

Children should begin the learning process earlier and assessed early on to determine their individual educational needs. This assessment should identify needs and prescribe developmentally appropriate experiences necessary so that each five year old child can enter school ready to learn. Those needing special attention should receive it through Head Start and other early education programs initiated and supported through joint collaboration among schools, social service agencies, and community-based organizations.

4. An Engaging Learning Environment

The learning environment should be sensitive to the developmental needs of the individual student. Students should be active learners, growing through progressive experiences in seeking, organizing, and applying knowledge and skills in cooperative learning environments. Students

should have continuous opportunity to grow intellectually and emotionally through dialogical learning, investigation of important facts, values, and concepts, creative expression in the fine arts, integration of mathematics into multidisciplinary scientific and technical applications, creative hands-on problem-solving, and collaboration with fellow students and teachers. The relationships between and amongst students and teachers and student should be understood as the heart of what matters (Brogan & Brogan, 1993).

5. Family Involvement

Family involvement is essential to the success of outcome-based student achievement. We believe that schools must make the message clear that parents are welcomed partners in the educational process and that this partnership will include meaningful engagement in matters that go beyond the tradition of "making cookies" (Henderson, 1987). Parents must understand the expectations of the school and be carefully informed on the progress of their child.

6. A Community Partnership

In order for outcome-based education to stand the challenge of implementation, a comprehensive policy for the development of youth through collaboration with the local, regional, and state community is essential. Tapping the almost unlimited potential of school facilities as year-round Lifelong

Learning Centers, the school must become the center of the community. In addition, partnerships with postsecondary institutions, the business community, and other community agencies and organizations will be needed. To ensure that non-academic concerns do not interfere with student performance, community agencies and organizations should be encouraged to use available facilities in and near the schools to provide support services to children

7. Qualified Teachers

Teachers have the primary responsibility for enabling students to achieve the goals and objectives of an outcome-based curriculum and consequently need ample opportunity to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to implement outcome-based learning and assessment. High academic standards are needed in teacher preparation programs to ensure that individuals entering the teaching profession are fully prepared in the knowledge, pedagogy, and learning assessment techniques needed to teach successfully in an outcome-based system. because of what we will expect of our students, teachers must demonstrate the knowledge and skills required to foster active learning, teach higher-order thinking, and teach cross-disciplinary subjects in an integrated learning environment.

8. State of the Art Facilities

If students are to achieve the necessary proficiency in integrated applications of knowledge and higher-order problem

solving, they need access to technical support systems such as multimedia computers and school libraries that have electronic on-line library circulation systems and on-line data bases and communication linkages, and other state-of-the-art resources as they are developed.

9. School Governance

It is not likely that the goals of outcome-based education will be achieved unless there is a change in the way schools are governed. Many teachers feel left out of school policy decisions that directly affect what goes on in their classroom. School administrators are likewise frustrated with the need to comply with outside policies and mandates that stand in the way of school performance. Therefore, a shift in the focus of school governance from centralized input-oriented mandates to decentralized outcome-based performance standards is required. An increase in the local authority of school-based professionals in areas such as budget, personnel and curriculum is essential. School districts need to engage in strategic planning and evaluation for the purpose of achieving higher levels of educational outcomes.

Closing Questions and Conclusions

A review of the literature and extensive informal discussion with parents and educators (teachers, administrators, and professors of education) provided the

basis for the development of a number of questions concerning outcome-based education. Although these questions are by no means comprehensive we hope they do set the stage for meaningful discussion and perhaps provide the catalysts for other questions that must be addressed.

What evidence do we have that outcome-based education works any better than the current system?

Although the is limited research on the success of outcome-based education, there is a growing number of reports from schools and school districts that have implemented outcome-based education. The best know of these school districts is Johnson City, New York where an outcome-based model has been in place for fifteen years. In addition to high marks from school district educators and parents, a number of research reports have substantiated the district's claims of success (Vickery, 1990). The Outcomes-Driven Developmental Model, developed by former district administrator Albert Mammary, is used to coordinate and align a school's desired outcomes. Mammary (1992) emphasized the importance of administrative, teacher and parent support and offers a number of points critical to the success of outcome-based education. The number of schools and districts that have adopted the outcome-based approach continues to grow as do the number of self-reported success stories Nyland, 1991; McLeod, 1992; Guskey, 1991; Sambs, 1991; Rubin, 1984).

Although this data is exploratory in nature, they provide a the baseline for more empirical research.

Who determines the outcomes and whose values should they reflect?

Given organizational and financial constraints, how will the current system accommodate the major reorganization that will be necessary in order to make the "transformation" to outcome-based education?

What will result in terms of expectations if we require all students to achieve performance standards? What about those who fail to meet these performance standards?

What assurance can we provide parents who are satisfied with the current system that their children will not suffer academically as a result of an outcome-based system.

How reliable is performance assessment that is based on criterion validation?

The following conclusions resulted from this investigation:

(1) The questions and concerns surrounding the assumptions of outcome-based education need to be addressed and provide a basis for a serious debate on those issues.

(2) The political specter is an important dimension of outcome-based education that cannot be ignored.

(3) The full potential of outcome-based education will only be achieved if the emphasis is on the learning process and not the "outcome."

(4) The success of outcome-based education will be proportional to the extend of change in the current structure and organization of schools.

We believe that outcome-based education has the potential to dramatically change the way in which our schools are organized. As the influence of outcome-based education expands, a number of legitimate questions and concerns have surfaced. This paper endeavored to provide educators with an agenda for debating those issues and responding to those questions that present a genuine challenge to the movement toward performance-based education.

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